

Online Working Paper

No. 2

**Spirits of Capitalism and the De-alienation of Workers:
a Historical Perspective on the Mauritian Garment In-
dustry**

Patrick Neveling
Institute for Social Anthropology
Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg

Globalisation and related issues of economic development are still one of the vividly discussed topics in social anthropology. By looking at two specific periods of the history of the Mauritian garment industry, this paper aims to contribute to one of the central debates: how changing social realities and social relations in societies subject to new industrial divisions of labour can be integrated into theory building and represented in ethnography. The central line of argumentation combines Parry's (1999) and Baca's (2005) on Ong (cf. 1987, 1991) and shows how misperceptions of global economic developments leads to misrepresentations of workers' struggles and relations of production in 'newly industrialised countries' (NIC). Based on the juxtaposition of the developments described in Ong's work with material and data collected in Mauritius, a more comprehensive framework for an anthropology of globalised industrial work is suggested in the concluding remarks.

"For them [the workers, P.N.] you have to be a pain in the ass with a smile."
Factory Manager, *Aquarelle Textiles Ltd.*, July 2004

In 2003 and 2004 I conducted fieldwork on the Mauritian textile and garment industry. The aim was to find out how the industry and overall Mauritian society would respond to the liberalisation of international trade under the new regime enforced by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Among other research activities, I worked in a factory producing men's shirts as a helping hand in all sections. One day during a brief talk after a meeting of the 'Trim & Exam'-section, the factory's manager used the above words to illustrate the every-day strategies he used to keep workers' productivity matching the daily target.

As many other factories in Mauritius, this one was struggling to maintain its market position in the face of growing pressure from international retailers. The latter companies like *Eddie Bauer*, *Gap*, *Zara*, and others had lowered prices and placed more and more orders at Chinese and Indian factories. The manager was under constant pressure from the managing director of the *Aquarelle Textile Group* to achieve higher productivity than the four other factories run by the group in Mauritius. An announcement had been made that all but the most productive factory would be closed down and production relocated to new factories the group was about to or had already opened in Madagascar and India. These policies were developed within the larger framework of *CIEL Textiles Ltd.*, a holding company owning *Aquarelle Textiles* and four other large companies in the textile and garment sector. As the following quote from the 2003 shareholder report shows, the whole group was reorganised to meet international competition and to restructure all factories to face the upcoming final step of liberalisation of world trade scheduled for January 1st 2005:

"As a result of the difficult trading year experienced in 2002/2003, we made great strides in further implementing an operational restructuring that should help us achieve our organisation's medium term objective. Our aim is to strengthen our Group as a market driven entity that relies on strong industrial performance. It is pleasing to note that this exercise, which requires changing habits, has found expression in people's behaviour and attitude." (Chairman's statement, *CIEL Textiles* shareholder report 2003)

CIEL Textiles employed more than 13.000 out of a total of 90.000 employees in the textile and garment sector in Mauritius in 2003. Therefore changes in com-

pany policy affected 14 percent of the sector's workers at first sight. But their effect extended to working conditions in smaller companies as well. New pay systems, shifting organisation of work processes and extended working hours had an effect on Mauritian society in general as they altered daily routines in households and family structures.

It is obvious that the Mauritian case presented here, despite all its local peculiarities to be discussed later is part of a general trend in early 21st century world economy. This trend entails downsizing and relocating production sites from one country to another by transnational corporations (TNC) (cf. Sklair 1999).¹

Local populations and national governments are left to deal with questions of unemployment, emigration and the threat of shrinking gross national products (GNP). One central argument of TNC managers for relocation usually is that the new production site offers better legal and economic infrastructures for the accumulation of capital. Therefore, national economic policy has laid an increasing emphasis on the concept of locational factors which include labour laws, infrastructure, costs of social welfare systems and taxation policies. Despite a now long-time interest in various dimensions of late 20th century globalisation, anthropologists have not yet fully grasped these developments in their research. What has been the focus of study are two other directions:

The first one emphasises a counter-concept to top-down and centre-periphery models of globalisation. "Glocalisation" was taken up from the vocabulary of marketing studies (cf. Robertson 1995). The main thrust is on research about local reactions to and local appropriations of global developments. Prototypical examples are the works of Daniel Miller on the culture of consumption (cf. Miller 1987, 1994, 1995), a realm where most subsequent studies have been based. Discussions are often based on what the respective anthropologists perceive as juxtaposed phenomena: The globalisation of market and consumer goods leads to a cultural 'homogenisation' (cf. Ritzer 1993) or – despite of the emergence of an economically dominant market – cultural heterogeneity prevails (Hannerz: 1992).

The second focus is engaged with a similar dichotomy of local and global, but emphasis on the unequal division of power in the global economy is stronger. It is most prominent in studies on the organisation of industrial labour in third world countries and has seen a shift from neo-marxist discussions of economic development and peripheral industrialisation (cf. Nash 1993 [1979], Robinson 1986) to a more culturalist approach influenced by Scott's concept of "weapons of the weak" (Ong 1987).

As the central focus of this paper is a critique and extension of the latter culturalist approach to the phenomenon of industrial production, the following paragraphs will be devoted to a critical discussion of one influential anthropologist, Aihwa Ong, as one outstanding and often cited example of the culturalist approach.

¹ It is important to note that public debate in Western industrialised countries often attributes this process of relocation to corporations that originated in Western countries and are perceived to have 'transnationalised' later. In countries like Mauritius, transnational corporations delocalising production are either owned by Mauritians or consortiums from Hong Kong or Singapore. Their names – like CIEL, Chrystal Group or Novel Garments – never appear on the charta of transnational corporations in Western countries.

"The New..." in the Anthropology of Globalisation

Ong's is surely one of the most influential anthropological approaches to work relations in newly industrialised countries (NIC). Not only is her book on the "Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline" in a Malaysian free-trade zone (FTZ) often quoted, she is also the author of the most recent discussion of industrial labour regimes in the Annual Review of Anthropology entitled "The Gender and Labour Politics of Postmodernity" (Ong 1991).

Parry (1999) has criticised Ong for her romantic perception of pre-industrial times in Malaysian peasantry – a romanticism that swings along in her historical comparison of colonial and postcolonial labour and property regimes. Based on his own research among workers of an Indian steel plant, he challenges a second of Ong's assumptions: the social status of workers in new industries is in his interpretation anything but marginal. Instead, in NICs those workers are usually perceived as better off by their neighbours – not only because ideologies of modernisation and development lure them into a false belief, but also because jobs in new industries are often better paid, offer more job security and higher social status in the local community.

One could now argue that there are surely differences between Indian steel plant workers and Malaysian FTZ workers. This is true for male workers in the early years of the textile and garment factories in Mauritius, but for female workers it is different. Many Mauritians tell stories about how – in the decade following the opening of the Mauritian export-processing zone (EPZ)² – women working in the textile and garment industry were stigmatised and discriminated against as being immoral and disloyal to their family and household duties. Women were and still are paid significantly lower wages than men in the same job. On top of that as in Ong's study on Malaysia Mauritian factories' hierarchies show a disproportional ratio of men in higher and better paid positions. But even if Malaysian women workers are not Parry's "Lords of Labour" another aspect of his critique is valid. As has recently been argued by Baca (2005), some anthropologists have refrained from critical discussions of macro-level theories developed in other social sciences. Instead, they tend to adopt assumptions about changes in the general structures of the capitalist world economy uncritically. Baca compares Mintz's (1977) appraisal of Wallerstein's world-system perspective (1976) accompanied by a challenge of the centre-periphery paradigm to how Ong "...embraces the thesis of flexible accumulation as if it were an axiom..." (Baca 2005: 39) and extends it to the concept of "Flexible Citizenship" (Ong 2000)³. For David Harvey's concept of flexible accumulation, Baca convincingly shows how differences in

² Export-processing zones as free-trade zones were one of the most prominent models employed in political efforts of third-world industrialisation. Here the state usually tries to attract foreign investors by offering tax and customs holidays, free infrastructure projects, special labour laws usually including bans on unionisation and other financial incentives. Please note the resemblance of these policies first employed in Puerto Rico in 1947 and today adopted within more than 1.000 EPZs employing more than 80.000.000 workers world wide (Romero 1998).

³ Another and for me even more striking example is Marcus' (1995) uncritical way of relying on the analysis of changes in global developments by a Nobel prize winning economist. While I do not want to go into details here, I think it is important to state that Nobel prizes have in recent years been awarded to rather dubious figures such as former PLO-leader Yassir Arafat or German novelist Günther Grass. The Nobel prize for economics has usually been awarded to leading actors in the field of applied theory of international economics who should be seen and treated as such by anthropologists.

local and regional economic developments within the United States and different applications of 1930s "New Deal" policies have led to different forms and in some regions the absence of Fordism in the US. More generally, he shows how reference to the forms of discipline exercised on workers by the 20th century welfare state in the US can enrich the concept of flexible accumulation without discarding it.

But in Ong's appraisal of flexible citizenship, Baca discovers a desire for "newness":

"When concepts of globalization, such as promoted by Ong, fail to relate change to continuity they celebrate what Trouillot has called 'newness' in ways that 'silence much of world history'." (2005: 40)

The perceptions of global as well as local developments as entirely new already struck me when I first came across Ong's earlier writings on third world industrialisation. Following a demand for "theoretical flexibility" of anthropologists (1991: 304) because production sites apparently moved back from developing countries to metropolitan areas in the late 1980s⁴, she asks for a dismissal of workers' struggles as class-struggles:

"Instead, I propose that we conceive of workers' experiences as cultural struggles – that is, workers struggle against *new* and varied forms of domination, and seek *new* ways of grappling with social realities. Such cultural resistance and production engender a *new* sense of self and community, potentially challenging the constitution of civil society." (1991: 304; emphasis added)

On the following pages I will try to show that this search for "newness" in global economic developments and their local effects and appropriations is in danger of two things: Locals are presented as locals and in Friedman's sense "indigenised" (1999). They have nothing left to defend themselves with other than their culture which is for them – in Ong's portrayal – the first and most promising form of resistance if confronted with modern factory regimes.

Focussing on these cultural struggles also lacks an analysis of the negotiations that take place within in nation-states and within factories. Different actors with differing knowledge of the processes of production, the structure of the respective international markets for the goods produced and the respective company's position within these markets are involved in these negotiations. Thus, if anthropology narrows its focus to the cultural struggles of workers it misses out on the culture(s) of important factions of the international capitalist economy and "occidentalises" (Carriers 1992a) the structures of this international economy as working according to the laws of economic rationality.

To do this I will compare Ong's findings in Malaysia to my own research in Mauritius and, therefore, start with a brief history of Mauritian export-led industrialisation. In a second step, the historical integration of both countries into the international capitalist markets and the position of women in both societies will be compared. This is followed by a discussion of female workers' possession by spirits in Mauritian and Malaysian factories in the early phase of post-independence industrialisation to find out whether such beliefs can be portrayed as forms of resistance. Turning to present day strategies of mobilising labour in Mauritian factories, the concept of workers' "de-alienation" is introduced. In my conclusion, I will

⁴ Unfortunately there is no reference to which production sites these should be, in which sector and how many jobs were concerned.

try to show that this concept can be a useful extension of Carrier's (1992b) and Burawoy's (1979) work.

A Short History of Mauritian Economic Development after Independence

When Mauritius was officially granted the legal status of an independent nation-state by the United Kingdom in 1968, prospects for the country's political and economic future seemed anything but promising. Too high was the dependency on sugar cane – the only commodity suitable for export (cf. Dommen & Dommen 1993, Paturau 1988). And too violent had been the struggles between the two main political factions in Mauritius over the issue of independence: the Independent Forward Block (IFB) opted for autonomous status within the Empire and the Labour Party (LP) for independence. Because the different political interests of these two blocks were equated in public opinion with ethnic tensions between Indo-Mauritian Hindus siding with the LP and an alliance of Franco-Mauritians, the Creole population mainly of African descent, and Muslims⁵ siding with the IFB, the country had to face a serious brain drain. More than 60.000 of the 800.000 inhabitants mainly from the educated petty bourgeoisie left between 1967 and 1970 (Dinan 1985).

In 1970 a law was passed in parliament that laid the foundation for the island's later economic boom under the legal regime of an EPZ⁶. The decision for changing the country's strategy of economic development from an import-substitution policy to export-led development was preceded by heated debates in parliament. Controversial opinions here criss-crossed the two factions mentioned above. Opposition broke down only after a survey mission headed by Mauritian economist Lim Fat had investigated the EPZs in Taiwan and Hong Kong and reported in favour of such an economic strategy for Mauritius⁷. A second important figure in the debate was the owner of a factory called *Micro Jewels* who had obtained tax and customs exemptions for processing parts of Swiss watches in 1965 by private lobbying in London (personal conversation August, 20th 2003, see also Burn 1996). Successful lobbying of the private sector in parliament was followed by the government lobbying the public sphere. A ten year development plan was introduced in the media promising the creation of 130.000 new jobs for the island. Quite a promise for a population suffering from poverty and unemployment rates of around twenty percent. At the same time the slogan "*discipline, travail et progres*" was introduced, hinting at sacrifices and changes of work habits necessary for new jobs and economic success (l'express January 21st, 1971).

⁵ The roots of these different populations can be traced back to French colonialists who in 1968 controlled most of the island's economy, slaves imported mainly from the African continent to work on the sugar plantations and contract workers indentured in India to do the same after the slaves were freed (Vaughan 2005).

⁶ For a full list of the incentives granted to foreign and local investors under the Export Processing Zone Act in 1970 and the changes in 1983 see Durbarry (2001).

⁷ A vivid example of these debates is the first reading of the Export Processing Zones Bill in 1970. While the opponents speak out mainly because of moral reasons and question the economic benefits of the law for more than one or two individual factory owners (Debates of Legislative Assembly 1970: 1244-1256), the advocates paint a picture of immediate economic prosperity resulting from an EPZ with synergies in the sector of tourism (ibid: 939-945).

Mauritian economists have divided the rise of post-independence industrialisation into four phases (cf. Yin 1992, Durbarry 2001): From 1970 to 1979 numerous factories were set up in the EPZ by foreign as well as local investors creating around 20.000 jobs. Most of the latter came from owners of sugar plantations and mills. Those first years of development saw the rise of a strong leftist movement, the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (MMM). The MMM campaigned for stronger workers' rights and against the continuous control of the Mauritian economy by the old French colonial elite. These demands found strong resonance in the population leading to massive general strikes in 1975 and 1979. Already in 1973, the LP government had declared a state of emergency under which a new labour law – the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) – was passed and elections were postponed until 1976 (Selvon 2001). In a close race, a coalition of all parties managed to defeat the MMM, but the 1982 elections gave a sweeping 60-0 seats victory to the MMM. By that time the oppositions leaders' teeth had already been sanded and despite its radical party program, the MMM fully supported a structural adjustment program introduced after the Mauritian state was close to bankruptcy in 1979 (Houbert 1992). The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund did not find much to adjust since labour laws did not allow collective bargaining since 1973; there was no minimum wage, and the EPZ had already facilitated foreign investment and had given guarantees against the nationalisation of private companies. Nevertheless, some new incentives for foreign investors were created (Durbarry 2001) and Mauritius was granted financial support.

This second phase of decline in the EPZ ended around 1984 when numerous companies from Hong Kong extended their activities to Mauritius after preferential export quota for the European market had been exceeded⁸. Until 1990, 70.000 new jobs were created in the EPZ mainly in textile and garment factories. When in the early nineties full employment improved workers' position to individually bargain wages and threatened Mauritius' image as a low-wage investment heaven, government allowed the import of contract workers from India and China. Plans were also made for a second phase of industrialisation (Ministry of Industry & Industrial Technology 1990). This strategy was planned at first as a vertical integration of the textile and garment sector with more production steps such as spinning, dyeing and finishing located in Mauritius. But government strategy changed when this third phase, a period of consolidation, ended in 1995. The foundation of the WTO signalled the end of preferential export quota for Mauritius to the European market and since then companies have started to relocate their production to countries in Eastern Africa and later to India, Pakistan and China⁹. The number of employees in the garment sector declined by nearly forty percent until 2005. At the same time, a Cyber City was built to attract jobs in the IT sector and activities in the booming market for tourism increased. The reputation of the textile industry as the engine of economic progress and a provider of secure jobs ended (Industry Focus 1999, 2003). Workers in the sector are today – if still employed – no longer seen as "Lords of Labour" but looked at by their neighbours with pity because of their comparatively low wages, low education, and low job security.

⁸ As a member of the British Commonwealth, Mauritius was given preferential access to the European market for textiles and clothing under the *Multi-Fibre Arrangement* in 1974.

⁹ The relocation of course had its ups and downs with some companies coming back when business plans failed. Nevertheless from 1995 to 2005 one can identify a general trend of relocation.

Mauritian and Malaysian Ways into Export-led Development

A comparison of Mauritian to Malaysian developments studied by Ong (1987) reveals some similarities but also striking differences. State bureaucracy and legal apparatus in both cases strongly supported investors. Workers in Mauritius and Malaysia had been subjected to the capitalist world economy under British colonial rule in Mauritian sugar estates and Malaysian rubber estates (ibid: 16–34) and both countries had a long history of labour movements starting in the 1930s (ibid, for Mauritius: Allgoo 1985). Referring to Eric Wolf's critique of anthropology's creation of "people without history" (Ong 1987: 2), Ong dedicates two chapters of her book to the socio-economic history of *Coastal Selangor*, the Malaysian region she researched. The reader is taken along the immigration of indentured labourers from the Indonesian archipelago, India and China who worked together with local Malays on the rubber plantations (ibid: 16–18). The influences of changing prices for rubber on the world market on the local economy (ibid: 24–27), respective household strategies to diversify income by taking up different jobs (ibid: 28), and the rise of a communist movement after the Second World War (ibid: 29) are documented.

Nevertheless, it seems as if local Malaysian women never worked on the rubber plantations, but restricted their activities to the household. Considering the integration of women into plantation societies in nearby Sumatra, this seems highly unlikely (Stoler 1985) and rather matches the imagination of the "indolence" of Malay women created by British colonial authorities in Malaysia from whose reports Ong quotes. Surprising is also how Ong portrays the communist insurgency as if it never touched Malay peasants; instead they only profited from jobs in the new security forces created to control upheavals by Chinese dock workers and other immigrant groups in the plantations (Ong 1987: 30).

While these are only superficial observations, it is obvious that both of Ong's arguments support a picture of local women taking up work in Japanese FTZ factories set up in 1972 as if they had for the first time in history left their fire-heated stoves. Ong then moves on to supplement this picture of women being subject to two regimes of discipline: the traditional Islamic gender roles (ibid: 85ff.) and the women's organisation entertained by the *United Malays National Organization* (UMNO), "...the dominant Malay faction of the ruling National Front coalition" (ibid: 38). Factory management, therefore, only had to apply these patriarchal hierarchies to enforce capitalist discipline on the shop floor (ibid: 162ff.). One company's philosophy, "to create one big family, to train workers, to increase loyalty to the company, country and fellow workers" (ibid: 170) is fully in line with Japanese *Kayzen* management philosophy. Nevertheless it is interpreted in terms of local gender hierarchies, with the factory managers as father figures guarding the female workers' morality. The "off-stage voices of factory women" (ibid: 195) in the Malaysian FTZ confirmed their status as immoral "maidens" who did not conform to moral and religious norms but who went out to the movies, spent money to achieve the "Electric look" (ibid: 199) and date men. While such leisure time activities may be typical for young women working in EPZ factories in many countries (see Kim 1997), the following section tries to show, that it is nevertheless hard to imagine a society where such strict moral norms exist below the surface and are more than local stereotypes of gender roles.

In Mauritius women workers in factories were and still are subject to patriarchal gender roles on the shop floor. In the 1970s they were also subject to accusa-

tions of immoral actions such as dating men and using or rather wasting their wages as "lipstick money". Both these accusations of course contributed to a picture of female workers as playful and not to be taken too seriously. But as in other countries (Nash & Fernández-Kelly 1983, Kim 1997), they played an important role in anti-capitalist movements. Women's participation in the strikes in 1975 and 1979 and their furious battles against riot police quickly became known over the island and EPZ women workers soon after were respectfully called *Amazones* (Ah-Vee & Lallah 1986).

On top of this, women dating men and having extramarital sexual relations were anything but a result of 1970s industrialisation. Such relations had been widespread on sugar plantations in the 19th and 20th century where women, sometimes out of personal attraction sometimes out of economic need, entertained sexual relations with male workers and foremen (Vaughan 2005). *Marriage Blanche* is the term used for the economically most attractive form of these relationships until today: an extramarital affair with a member of the Franco-Mauritian middle or upper class. Today the same concept is also used for similar relations with foreign tourists.

One could of course reply now that this is sufficient proof that Mauritius is a society with different sexual morals and norms than Malaysia, but the history of sexuality in Southeast Asia and especially in the Strait of Malacca (Reid 1988) – where Ong's "maiden" workers live – seriously questions the Malaysian "tradition". In Mauritius the phenomenon of sexuality confined to marriage was restricted to the upper-middle class. Only the economic boom in the 1980s, resulting social mobility, and religious "revitalisation", gave people from other social strata the urge to live up to these moral principles. I would, thus, suggest that in a more historical perspective these changes in sexual morality as well as the stigmatisation of women factory workers should be perceived as side effects of the ideologies of modernisation and development. This is, of course, not to say that some young women did not experience earning their own money, meeting men in the factory, and other changes mentioned by Ong as new forms of liberty. But at the same time these changes meant new forms of subordination to factory gender roles and these gender roles cannot simply be compared to household structures – no matter whether they existed or not. They can also not be understood as a simple transition from the moral economy of the peasant to capitalist economic principles (Ong 1987: 193). Instead as we shall see later, they must be analysed as forms of subordination integrated into a new differentiation of personal and impersonal social relations.

Spirits of Resistance or Spirits of Capitalism?

The preceding discussion showed that Ong, despite reference to Wolf (1982) in her introduction (Ong 1987: 2), herself accepts the modernist invention of Malaysian FTZ women workers as "people without history". I will now turn to the question of resistance and discuss whether the *hantu* (ghosts) that caused women to be possessed in the factories should really be interpreted as "spirits of resistance". To achieve this I will again confront the Malaysian example with material gathered in Mauritius.

Women in Mauritian factories knew quite well what they were going through on the shop floor and how to react to it. This is obvious if one looks at the ways the "spirits of resistance" entered Mauritian shop floors in the 1970s. As in the Ma-

laysian factories different types of spirits haunted the factories. In 1973 all operators of a plant near *Plaine Lauzan*, one of the first three EPZ industrial zones created in Mauritius, started having cramps and fell on the floor screaming. In many Mauritian possession incidents, the same Catholic priest (personal conversation with Catholic priest August 3rd, 2004) was in charge of clearing the factories from evil spirits – as the *bomoh* (spirit-healer, Ong 1987: 204) was in the Malaysian cases. Whenever the priest was called to perform exorcism in a factory, he had to bring along a psychologist to certify that workers did face problems that could not be solved by his treatment¹⁰. How such an exorcism was carried out is well described in a novel by Lindsey Collen, an award winning Mauritian author¹¹:

"A roman Catholic Priest who specialised in exorcism was called in as an emergency by the boss. He and his sakristen [minister, P.N.] arrived. Both were in full fancy dress. Long robes, gold crosses, purple cummerbund and what-nots.

The unconscious Deomala was picked up first by the priest and his assistant, laid on a table, and hit firmly on each side of the jaw.

"O nom di-per, di-ifs, di-sen-tespri." [In the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost, P.N.]

Sign of the cross.

Deomala came round.

"Next," bawled the priest. [...]

The piece rate for that day was drastically slowed down." (Collen 1991: 144)

The women workers characters' in Collens' book pass through similar stages as Malaysian factory workers portrayed by Ong do. They first try to keep the daily target low by taking turns in visiting the lavatory and only after this does not work the spirits appear (Collen 1991: 140; Ong 1987: 200). But Collen also mentions that they are put under constant pressure to speed up work by reference to the large numbers of unemployed workers waiting at the factory gates to replace them on their sewing machines. And they are told by the supervisors how much harder and faster women in the Philippines work and sew:

"In the Philippines [...] workers work four times you lazy girls' speed. The boss is bringing a Filipino team to prove it. So no need to pretend you can't speed up a bit." (Collen 1991: 141)

The mainly Creole women workers who experienced possession in *Plaine Lauzan* in 1973 stated after the incident that the body of a French coloniser was buried below the factory and his ghost was haunting the factory.

This is similar to one form of spirit possession documented for Malaysian workers who claimed that the FTZ had been erected on the burial grounds of their ancestors. But the Mauritian workers' claim is a different one: Work rules in the factory

¹⁰ This procedure was in line with changes in Vatican policies on exorcism in the early 1970s. Exorcism could only be performed when all other possible causes of the victim's problems had been excluded.

¹¹ "There is a tide", the novel I quote from, was praised in Mauritius for its powerful language but also for its realistic fiction. Of course some parts of the novel are fiction, but others and especially the one's on working conditions are based on Collen's political work in the *Muvman lib-erasyon fam* (Women's Liberation Movement) during which she listened to and collected numerous reports by women working in the "Free Zone" (personal communication with Lindsey Collen, May and July 2004). Although I collected some narratives from workers, managers and the Catholic priest that match her descriptions I choose to quote passages from her book because they are the only ones that integrate all relevant events.

are not in contradiction to the culture of their ancestors, but rather a re-emergence of the times of colonial plantation systems and slavery not even overcome after Mauritian independence. One may now wonder whether the Malaysian workers regarded the political system of their ancestors as more desirable than any other.

Another Mauritian example highlights that workers chose to be possessed by spirits instead of being taken over by them: In 1978 a dispute between workers and management over delayed wage payments, bad working conditions and sexual harassment broke out in a factory in *St. Pierre*. The Hindu women employed according to the *Industrial Relations Act* (IRA) asked the *Ministry of Industrial Relations* to negotiate on their behalf. Factory management promised to pay outstanding wages but nothing happened (*l'express*, September 2nd 1978). A few weeks later in another newspaper, an article reported about "Nouveau mal-aise industriel: P'tit albert dans une usine à Saint Pierre?" (*The Nation*, September 27th 1978). The same priest as in 1973 was called to settle the score after a Hindu *pandit* had failed to calm down the spirits/workers (personal conversation with Catholic priest August 3rd, 2004).

In contrast to these events in Mauritius, Ong analyses the Malaysian examples despite their frequent occurrence as "... spontaneous, carried out by individual workers independently of each other" (1987: 210f.). She concludes romantically:

"The lamentations of possession victims decry the dislocation experienced by peasants in an industrializing world. The issue is not one of "false consciousness" or of everyday forms of resistance which may culminate in large scale rebellion. In the factories set up by transnational corporations, the constitution of new subjectivities unavoidably calls forth countertactics which proceed neither against the capitalism nor the state. These nomadic tactics [...] speak not of class revolt but only of the local situation. [...] The *syaitan* hovers over the passage of Malay peasants from a moral economy to an economy of commodities." (ibid: 213)

In Mauritius *P'tit Albert* – in the proper Creole language version called *tit albert* – is a mediator between men and the devil (personal conversation with Catholic priest August 3, 2004 and Hindu *pandit* in *St. Pierre* 1st August, 2004)¹². *Tit albert* hovered around the shop floors in the first two decades after the opening of the EPZ. I doubt whether there had ever been such a thing as a moral economy of the peasant in Mauritius. In the 1979 general strike, EPZ workers fought fiercely for the right to unionise (Ah-Vee & Lallah 1986). The spirit possessions in Malaysian factories show strong similarities to the ones in Mauritius. Thus, in both cases workers spoke of much more than the local situation as Ong declares in the quote above. Spirit possessions rather are comparable to what Taussig writes on the ritual practices of Bolivian miners and plantation workers¹³:

"Social progress and critical thought are bound to this dialectical task of defetishization. To this end labor exerts itself: to control its material as much as its poetic products, and not to be controlled by them. To falter in this struggle is to become enthralled by the fetishes of a patently false consciousness, whose material signs sustain an incomprehensible and mysterious reality – a void, bereft of humanity and of living people engaged in their livelihood. The beliefs and rites of the miners and plantation workers regarding the meaning of pro-

¹² For a more detailed account of *tit alberts* qualities see Jensen (1988).

¹³ Ong refers to Taussig's work several times (Ong 1987: 1, 3, 216), but somehow seems to have overlooked this interpretation.

duction defy this reality and fill the void with human concerns, and in this they have inspired some of the mightiest class struggles and poets of our times." (Taussig 2001 [1980]: 232)

In Taussig's case, it is the workers who work out ritual practices and through these practices even manage to inspire class struggles and poets. In Mauritius, the possession by spirits was a strategy consciously employed by women workers to lower the daily target or even get the factories closed for one or two days despite adverse labour laws. Contrary to Ong's assumptions, workers using possessions are engaged in their own forms of what Hobsbawm has called "collective bargaining by riot" (1987: 210). They are bargaining with factory management and bargaining with commodity fetishism at the same time.

The characters of Lindsey Collen's novel move on to participate in the 1979 general strikes only to be defeated and struggle to their feet again (Collen 1991: 148ff.). Ong's characters are individually engaged in "cultural struggles" who are subjected, in the early eighties, more and more to a "...medical model [...] replacing native interpretations of spirit attacks" (Ong 1987: 209).

Fairy Tales of Capitalism and the De-alienation of workers

In 2004 only few workers in the *Aquarelle Textiles* factory remembered the days of *tit albert* and spirit possessions. The factory manager himself could only think of what he had heard from neighbours when he was young. When I asked about the possibility of such incidents happening, most of the women workers laughed¹⁴. But their laughter was not one of shame or disregard for what went on in the factories in the 1970s and 1980s. Too vivid is the presence of *tit albert* and other spirits in Mauritian everyday life and too often do yellow press newspapers report on murder related to *longanistes*, *traiteurs* and other human intermediaries with the spiritual world. In the sewing section with nearly 200 machinists performing roughly 40 different operations at high speed at the same time and temperatures on a summer day reaching 40 degrees C, it is not easy to keep up the pace and reach the daily targets. Soon after lunch break the first workers come to the matching section to ask the woman in charge of the pharmacy box for *Panadol* pain-killers mixed with coffee, *Red-Heat* spray to prevent muscle cramps and other pills workers call *uppers*. Every once in a while a woman collapses and is carried to the emergency room. Especially then, the atmosphere gets tense and women start whispering about the causes of the incident.

Workers themselves employ counter-strategies to cope with impossible daily targets. The toilets are still the least clean place in the whole building and one has difficulties staying there longer than is needed. As scientific management has improved and daily targets are no longer adjusted to average performance rates of the section but to how many seconds the production engineers have calculated for a single operation, these strategies would fail anyway. Instead, women jointly try to cheat on the line manager and the *Vertex* software system used by the factory management to calculate workers output and wages. The woman in

¹⁴ The last account of spirit possession I came across took place in a Hong Kong owned factory in 1992. The newspaper report (l'express March 3rd, 1992) did not have the odeur of scandal and curiosity present in the 1970s but reads rather like a description of someone surprised how such a thing of the past could happen again.

charge hides bar codes of bundles of shirts already finished in the sewing section in the morning for hours in a drawer. She adds them onto the section's hourly performance in the afternoons when the line manager puts pressure on the assembly line supervisors to increase productivity. The Mauritian women try to flirt and joke with the Indian contract workers in the section who work much faster than them to pay off the debts they made to get a three year contract with a Bombay agent who hired them for *Aquarelle Textiles*.

Women spread rumours about the divorced line manager having an affair with the married factory manager and call the latter who is not a Muslim *Imam*. By this they refer to his preaching at the annual end of the year party when he rents a dancing hall on behalf of the company management. For his preaching he translates quotes from books like Peter Drucker's "Awaking the Giant Within", the Dalai Lama or Dale Carnegie's writings into Creole. As he put it when he talked about one of the presentations to me, he tried to turn workers into better human beings who learned to work responsibly in the factory, take good care of the quality of their products to better cater European and American clients of the factory. He still referred to an order when the factory had to pay 8.000.000 Mauritian Rupees indemnity to Eddie Bauer because too many threads stuck out and buttons were not sewn firmly so that the average quality level of the order placed was not matched. His efforts to achieve higher quality are supported by the Quality Management section which has employees in each section and makes sample surveys of already packed shirts before they are sent to customers.

Conclusion

In her conclusion Ong, states that industrial development in third-world countries does work along different lines than the sequential stages of class struggle she identifies in Burawoy's writings (Ong 1987: 216). But concerning the changes in workers struggles against capitalist forms of production and the regimes of discipline employed by factory management and developed by the scientific management specialists worldwide, a different picture emerges: Female factory workers are not only educated by factory managers, they also educate themselves in a search for better and stronger bargaining positions.

Burawoy (1979) distinguishes "relations in production" and "relations of production". As can be concluded from the phases the Mauritian textile and garment industry went through, relations of production are influenced by global markets and the rights of access negotiated between nation-states providing the legal framework of global trading regimes (cf. Crawford & Fiorentino 2005). To a lesser extent they are also shaped by relations between third-world companies producing clothes and first-world retail stores buying clothes (cf. Dicken 2003). On the national level, it is again nation-states providing investment incentives of various kind to workers.

In this paper I have tried to show the interconnectedness of historical shifts in the relations in production, the negotiation of labour regimes within factories among management and workers, and the relations of production which provide the framework for workers and management's bargaining position. These bargaining positions are under different influences: First there is the respective nation-state's position vis-à-vis other states in the international capitalist economy. As a small island state on the periphery, Mauritius has always had a weak position to bargain but has still done tremendously well (Bräutigam 2005). The better the Mau-

ritian state (and the worse other states) did, the more profitable the local industry became for investors. To a certain degree, a trickle-down effect improved workers' bargaining position and shaped relations in production. But even before the foundation of the WTO brought along the re-emergence of options for relocation to factory owners, the Mauritian government legalised the import of contract workers to increase competition in the domestic labour force.

Secondly, workers thus do not "emigrate to the state of twentieth century homelessness" (Ong 1987: 213). They are rather caught in what Carrier has called an "emerging alienation in production", mirrored by an emerging alienation of people and objects as well as people and people which started in Europe (Carrier 1992a) and elsewhere (Mintz 1986, Wolf 1982) long before the export-led modernisation policies of the twentieth century. Due to this state of betwixt and between, workers are vulnerable to strategies of de-alienation from the products of their labour by managers who try to make them identify with the company's policies and the customers demands. It does not matter whether they are threatened with information of workers in other countries being faster, the factory being one big family making a joint effort to achieve higher targets or being subject to personality building programs according to the writings of prophets of individuality and personal agency such as Peter Drucker or the Dalai Lama: Behind all these programs there is no Maussian "noblesse oblig  ", but a reintroduction of social obligation that enables a mobilisation of labour along fictional kinship ties and thus goes beyond the idealisation of a free labour market in capitalist economies. The spirits that haunt workers minds are shaped by the contradictions capitalist ideologies and capitalist realities produce.

Literature

Ah-Vee, Alain & Rajni Lallah 1986. *Listwar Lagrev Ut '79*. Port Louis: Ledikasyon pu Travayer.

Allgoo, Rajpalsingh 1985. *Le mouvement syndical    l'ile Maurice*. Port Louis: Artisans and General Workers' Union.

Baca, George 2005. Legends of Fordism: between myth, history, and foregone conclusions. In: Kapferer, Bruce (ed.). *The retreat of the social: the rise and rise of reductionism*. New York: Bergahan Books: 31–46.

Benedict, Burton 1966. Sociological characteristics of small territories and their implications for economic development. In: Banton, M. (ed.). *The social anthropology of complex societies*. London: Tavistock: 23–36.

Br  utigam, Deborah 2005. Strategic engagement: markets, transnational networks, and globalization in Mauritius. *Yale Journal of International Affairs*: 63–77.

Burawoy, Michael 1979. The anthropology of industrial work. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8: 231–266.

Burn, Naolini 1996. Mauritius. In: Kothari, Uma & Vidula Nababsing (eds.). *Gender & industrialisation: Mauritius, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka*. Stanley, Rose Hill: Editions de l'Oc  an Indien: 33–79.

-
- Carrier, James G. 1992a. Occidentalism: the world turned upside-down. *American Ethnologist* 19 (2): 195–212.
- Carrier, James G. 1992b. Emerging alienation in production: a Maussian history. *Man* 27 (3): 539–558.
- Crawford, Jo-Ann & Robert V. Fiorentino 2005. The changing landscape of regional trade agreements. Discussion Paper No.8. Geneva: WTO Publications.
- Collen, Lindsey 1991. *There is a tide*. Port Louis: Ledikasyon pu Travayer.
- Dabee, Rajen & David Greenaway (eds.) 2001. *The Mauritian economy: a reader*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave.
- Dicken, Peter 2003. *Global shift: reshaping the global economic map in the 21st century*. London u.a.: Sage.
- Dinan, Monique 1985. *Une île éclatée: analyse de l'emigration Mauricienne 1960–1982*. Port Louis.
- Dommen, Edward & Bridget Dommen 1999. *Mauritius: an island of success. A retrospective study 1960–1993*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Durbarray, Ramesh 2001. The Export Processing Zone. In: Dabee, Rajen & David Greenaway (eds.). *The Mauritian economy: a reader*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave: 105–129.
- Friedman, Jonathan 1999. Indigenous struggles and the descret charme of the bourgeoisie. *Journal of World System Research* V (2): 391–411.
- Hannerz, Ulf 1992. *Cultural complexity: studies in the social organization of meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Houbert, Jean 1992. The Indian Ocean creole islands: geo-politics and decolonisation. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (3): 465–484.
- Jensen, Jürgen 1988. Synkretismus und religiöse Konfession auf Mauritius. *Sociologus* 38: 1–18.
- Kim, Seung-Kyung 1997. *Class struggle or family struggle? The lives of women factory workers in South Korea*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Kothari, Uma & Vidula Nababsing (eds.) 1996. *Gender & Industrialisation: Mauritius, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka*. Stanley, Rose Hill: Editions de l'Océan Indien.
- Marcus, George E. 1995. Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.
- Miller, Daniel 1987. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: OUP.
- Miller, Daniel 1994. *Modernity: an ethnographic approach. Dualism and mass consumption in Trinidad*. Oxford: OUP.
- Miller, Daniel 1995. Consumption and commodities. *Annual review of anthropology* 24. New York: 141–161.
- Mintz, Sidney W. 1977. The so-called world system: local initiative and local response. *Dialectical Anthropology* 2, no. 4: 253–270.
- Mintz, Sidney W. 1986. *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history*. New York: Penguin Books.

- Nash, June C. & María Patricia Fernández-Kelly 1983. Women, men, and the international division of labor. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nash, June 1993 [1979]. We eat the mines and the mines eat us. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa 1987. Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: factory women in Malaysia. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ong, Aihwa 1991. The gender and labor politics of postmodernity. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20: 279–309.
- Ong, Aihwa 2000. Flexible citizenship: the cultural logics of transnationality. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Parry, Jonathan P. 1999. Lords of labour: working and shirking in Bhilai. In: Parry, Jonathan P., Jan Breman & Karin Kapadia (eds.). *The worlds of Indian industrial labour*. New Delhi, London: Sage Publications, 107–140.
- Paturau, J. Maurice 1988. *Histoire économique de l'île Maurice. Le Pailles/Mauritius*.
- Reid, Anthony 1988 & 1993. Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680. Vol. 1: The land below the winds. Vol. 2: Expansion and crisis. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Ritzer, George 1993. *The McDonaldization of society: an investigation into the changing character of contemporary social life*. Thousand Oaks u.a.: Pine Forge Press.
- Robertson, Roland 1995. Glocalization: time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In: Featherstone, Mike; Lash, Scott; Robertson, Roland (eds.). [*Global Modernities*](#). London: Sage Publications: 25–44.
- Robinson, Kathryn M. 1986. Stepchildren of progress: the political economy of development in an Indonesian mining town. Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Romero, Anna T. 1998. Export processing zones: addressing the social and labour issues. Geneva: International Labour Organisation, The Bureau for Multinational Enterprise Activities.
- Selvon, Sydney 2001. *A comprehensive history of Mauritius*. Port Louis, Mauritius: M.D.S.
- Sklair, Leslie 1999. Competing conceptions of globalization. In: *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 5/2:143–163.
- Stoler, Ann Laura 1985. *Capitalism and confrontation in Sumatra's plantation belt, 1870–1979*. New Haven u.a.: Yale University Press.
- Storey, William Kelleher 1997. *Science and power in colonial Mauritius*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Taussig, Michael T. 2001. *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press.
- Vaughan, Megan 2005. *Creating the creole island: slavery in eighteenth-century Mauritius*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Wallerstein, Immanuel 1976. *The modern world-system: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century*. New York: Academic Press.

Wolf, Eric 1982. *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yin, Pierre, et al. 1992. *L'île Maurice et sa Zone Franche: la deuxième phase de développement*. Mauritius: Editions de l'Océan Indien Ltée.

Other sources:

CIEL Textiles Ltd. 2003. *Annual report 2003*. Port Louis, Mauritius.

Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Official Report) 1970. Third Session, 3rd Legislative Assembly 10th March–30th June, 1970 Debates Nos. 1–19. Vol. I Mauritius: Authority of the Assembly.

Industry Focus. March–April 1999. *Vulnerable island*. Port Louis: Ministry of Industry & Commerce, EPZDA, MEDIA.

Industry Focus. May–June 2003. *The Future of the Textile Industry*. Port Louis: Ministry of Industry & Commerce, EPZDA, MEDIA.

l'express January, 21st 1970. *Discipline, travail et progres*. Port Louis.

l'express September, 2nd 1978. (Title unreadable). Port Louis.

l'express, March 3rd, 1992. *Hysterie dans une usine à Coromandel*. Port Louis.

The Nation September 27th, 1978. *Nouveau malaise industriel: P'tit albert dans une usine à Saint Pierre?* Port Louis.

Ministry of Industry & Industrial Technology 1990. *Mauritius at crossroads: the industrial challenges ahead*. Port Louis: Ministry of Industry & Industrial Technology.